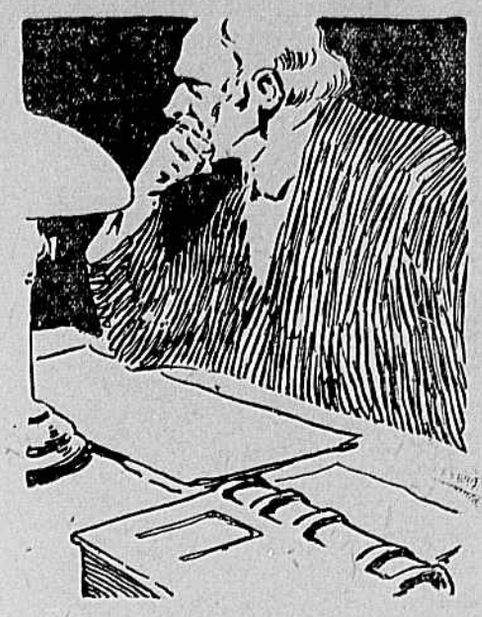
REAL ROMANCES OF THE BUSINESS WORLD

THE STRIKE AT OVERTON'S



BY RICHARD SPILLANE.

Mr. Overton sat and listened while the spokesman of the delegation presented the demands of the men. They wanted less hours and more money. It was not the detail of what the men demanded that impressed itself most on his mind at the moment, but the fact that they were in the attitude of opposition to him. That was what hurt. He had prided himself on two things: the fine quality of machine tools he turned out, and the fact that he never had a strike. There hardly was another factory of considerable size in the Passaic Valley with so good a labor record. He had been in closer touch with his employes than almost any other manufacturer in the whole district. There hardly was a man or boy of the 175 on the payroll that he didn't address by his first name. If one of the men was absent for a few days it had been his custom to go around to the house and find out what was the trouble. If it was illness he would see to it that everything necessary was provided for the workman's recovery and comfort. If the man had been on a spree the boss would lecture him and then tell him to get back to work and stop his foolishness.

And now his men—some of whom had been with him twelve years or more—were going to strike if their demands were not granted.

"How soon must you have your answer?" he asked the spokesman.

"We'd like to have it right away," said the man, "but we have to have it by Saturday night."

"And if I cannot grant what is—" Overton was saying.

"There will be a strike," broke in the spokesman.

"Very well," said Overton. "I'll take the matter under consideration."

The men filed out and Mr. Overton was left with his thoughts. He sat by the window and looked out. He could see the men in little groups discussing the reports they had received of the visit of the delegation. He saw old Peter Horry, his arm rising and descending as he emphasized what he was saying to the knot of men gathered about him. Peter had been ill the better part of one winter and his pay had gone on the same as if he had been at work. Now he was vehement in his advocacy of a strike. Peter was older than Overton, but at the moment the employer felt toward the old man as a father does toward a son who has been disobedient. "I'd like to box his ears," said Overton to himself as he returned to his desk.

It was in vain that he tried to attend to some correspondence that was piled up before him. He could think of only one subject—the threatened strike. There was no justice, so far as he could see, in the position of his employes. He had been a fair and generous employer. Few men had shown so much concern for the welfare of their operatives. Possibly he had been unwise in some of the things he had done. It was a mistake, probably, to put in the gymnasium and the baths, and the private lockers for each man and the factory restaurant and the little park for the men to rest in during the midday hour. They had liked these things at first, and he was delighted, but their ideas had changed. Some of them, he understood, had declared they got all the exercise they needed in the shop and didn't require horizontal bars, dumb-bells or Indian clubs to develop their muscles. Some of them, too, got to resent the idea of the baths. They could get all the washing they needed at home. The restaurant had been criticized. It was conducted at a loss, but somehow the idea came to the men that Overton established it for his own profit and that he was making money out of it. The park, too, did not meet with general favor. The city had plenty of parks to which the men could go on Sunday if they so desired. What galled Overton most was the report that came to him that a few agitators among his factory force had argued that if they received in additional wages what he had expended on these innovations he would be doing only what was just and proper—in other words, that he was using money that belonged to his men to do things that made it appear he was a kind and thoughtful employer.

Overton put on his hat and went into the factory. For the first time in his career he felt strange there. The men were back at their work, but they looked the other way or pretended to be busy when he approached. When he passed he knew without looking that he was being scrutinized. It made him uncomfortable. He stopped for a moment to talk with the foreman. But the foreman spoke in a whisper, as if afraid the men would overhear what he said, although he said nothing of any consequence.

From the factory he went into town and visited his banker. The two men were in consultation a long time, and when Overton left the bank his face was grave. Then Overton went home.

It was Thursday, and he had until Saturday to give his answer to the men, but there could be only one answer, and that was a refusal. Six months before he had heard mutterings of discontent, and before the men could give voice to their views he had surprised them by raising all hands 10 per cent. He felt then that the men were fully entitled to the increase. Business was booming. He had enough orders in hand to keep every machine employed at the fullest capacity for many months. He was prosperous. Times never were better. But a change had come over the situation. Hardly had he given out a contract for an addition to the factory than one of those clouds that come across the business horizon now and then developed. Orders were withdrawn. Collections were slow, and he had to use so much money for the addition to the factory that the banker suggested he be rather careful, as money was getting tight.

Overton did not have much appetite for dinner when he reached home. As usual he talked over the affairs of the day with his wife. She tried to cheer him, but it was no use. He went to bed early, but he couldn't sleep. Hour after hour he tossed about thinking and thinking. It was almost daybreak when at last he slumbered. At 7 o'clock he was at the factory. The men came in and went to their machines, but there was a spirit of unrest and suppressed excitement about the whole establishment. No factory in the country turned out better work than the Overton plant. He picked his men with care and never let a tool go out of his shop unless it was first class. His men were the most skilful in the trade, and he paid them above the regular wage scale on that account, but they never did such poor work as on that Friday.

When he reached home that night Mrs. Overton met him with a beaming face.

"John," she said, "I've been studying all day and I studied all last night for a way out of the difficulty. I don't know if I have found it, but sit down and while you are eating I'll explain it to you."

He sank wearily into his chair and she began. He did not think much of her idea at first, but as she talked he caught a little of her enthusiasm.

"It is worth trying," he said at last, and then they discussed her plan in detail.

There was no sign of depression about Overton when he went to his office on Saturday morning. He didn't go into the factory or look at the men at the machines. Instead he set the office force to working as they hadn't worked since the visit of the delegation. Typewriters clicked, pens were busy, and before noon a dozen messengers were sent out with bundles of letters all addressed to women. The letters were directed to the wives, sisters and mothers of the men who worked in the plant—to whoever of the women were concerned most directly in the welfare of the men. If a man was single and lived in a boarding-house the message went to his landlady. If he supported a widowed parent it went to his mother. Inclosed with each of the missives was a silver quarter. Each letter requested the person receiving it to come to the factory at 4 P. M. or send some of the women folk of the family. The quarter was for car fare, for the factory was quite a way out of the town.

The women began to arrive soon after 3 o'clock. They never had received such a summons before, and they could not understand what it portended. Some of them brought their children. By 4 o'clock the office was packed. Mrs. Overton never had seen the women, but her husband introduced her. He knew most of them. From the office the party adjourned to the restaurant. That establishment never had held such a gathering before. Tea had been brewed, and there were sandwiches and cakes. For the children there was a supply of candy. Most of the women—there were 250 or more present—had to stand while they sipped their tea, for there were not chairs enough to seat them.

When they all had been served, Mr. Overton arose.

"My friends," he said, "I have invited you here this afternoon to tell you some things about this factory, and to ask you to aid me in solving a problem that is of great importance to me and of considerable importance to you. I am going to start at the beginning and tell the whole story, so simply, so plainly, that there can be no misunderstanding.

"This factory is my life's work. Your husbands, sons and brothers are parts of the establishment. Some of you may not know what years of struggle this plant represents. I worked for a long time at a machine and at a forge, just as your men folks do to-day. I was careless, happy-go-lucky and improvident. One day there was a strike in the shop where I worked, and I went out with the others. I was glad of the opportunity to do so. For a week or ten days we had a fine time. I enjoyed every minute of it. There wasn't much doubt the strike would succeed, and we had one or two opportunities to settle with the boss, but he wouldn't agree to all our demands, so the strike continued.

"As time dragged on the situation was not so pleasant. Our money got low, and then the men who had been drinking got ugly and did things that made the fight one to a finish. That strike lasted for months. I probably suffered less than any one among the strikers, but I saw some things in that struggle that I never have forgotten. I saw women and children hungry. I saw them in rags. I saw them turned into the streets homeless when they no longer could pay the long overdue rent. They are the ones who bore the brunt of that bitter contest. We who were striking always could find companionship and solace in a saloon, but there was nothing but bitterness and privation for the women and the children.

"When that strike ended only a few of the scores of men who went out got jobs again. It was 'way back in '73, and there was a panic. Thousands of men were idle, and the whole country was in distress. I walked the streets searching for work until I wore the soles off my shoes. Many, many nights I went to sleep hungry. I fared better than those who had families. I had no one dependent upon me. When at last I got work I felt a joy I never knew before. Only one who has had the experience can understand the feeling.

"That strike was the turning point in my life. When I got straightened out once more I worked with a purpose. I determined I never would place myself in such a position again. I saved a little money and after a few years I rented a shack that you can see out there at the far end of the factory. I began to make tools on my own account. For a long time I didn't make living wages. Half a dozen times I was on the point of giving up and going back to a factory, but I hated to confess myself beaten. Then my affairs brightened a bit, and I saw a slight profit. Next I got orders enough to hire a man to help me, and a year later I had three helpers.

"Then I had to build a small shop, for my business was growing. I always tried to remember that my success depended largely upon the good will of my men.

"I have gone on year after year, my business growing and my plant increasing. In all the years I never have had a strike and never a serious dispute until the present time.

"Probably you think I am rich. I would be if I could turn into cash what my interest in this factory represents, but I could not carry on business at all were it not for the support of my bankers. Maybe you don't know how business is conducted. The pay roll has to be met every Saturday, whether business is good or bad. Sometimes collections are slow. Sometimes we have thousands and thousands of dollars' worth of material on hand for which we have paid and have tens of thousands of dollars due us for stuff we have sold, but for which we have to wait months before we can collect.

"To pay the men we have to get money from the bank and pay interest to the banker for lending it. Many, many times I have been in sore straits for cash, and yet have had a handsome profit on my books. It is not all serene in business. The man who gets his wages regularly may think the boss is to be envied, but sometimes the boss envies the man who has not his troubles to bear.

"I have tried to be fair with my men. Six months ago I heard that they were dissatisfied, and when I came to look over my affairs and saw how I had prospered the previous year, I could see I had made a larger profit than was mine in justice, so I raised the wages of every employe 10 per cent. (At this there were murmurs from various women.)

"The other day a delegation from the men presented a demand for another increase in wages and also for a reduction in hours. Conditions have changed. I fear we are going to have depression in our business. So many orders have been canceled that it is doubtful if I could keep the whole force employed until things brighten again. The extension to the factory, which I built recently, has used up all my surplus money. Collections are very bad. My banker has told me to go slow. Really I am operating this establishment to-day on his money, not my own.

"If I do not accede to the demands of the men by to-night they are to strike on Monday, but I want to tell you that if any men do not report for work on Monday this plant closes for all time, so far as I am concerned and they are concerned. If they do not report for work I shall turn this factory over to the banker whose interest in it by reason of the money I owe him is almost as large as mine.

"It is not for the men to decide the question, however. It is for you. A strike is of more vital concern to the wife, the mother, the sister and the child than to the man. It is the woman upon whom the burden rests. It is she who suffers most.

"I have told you the story of my experience in that strike far back in the days of my early manhood. I never want to see suffering such as that again. I never will have it come through a factory of mine if I can avoid it. I cannot give what the men demand without bringing ruin upon myself. A strike, too, means disaster to me. But bad as is my plight, yours is worse, for yours means misery, hunger, privation and shattered homes.

"For my men I have no answer to their demands. You must answer for me. I bid you good-day."

And he left them and went with his wife into the office.

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On Monday every man was in his place before the whistle blew. Never were they so early before.

"I wouldn't mind," said old Peter Horry, ruefully, "if the boss hadn't told about the 10 per cent. raise six months ago. I never told my old woman about that."